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ABSTRACT

As the field of sociolinguistics has emerged, its terminology, which like many other emerging disciplines contains many neologisms and new usages, has sometimes been called insensitive. This reaction may interfere with serious examination of the field's content. Areas of disagreement or dispute include terms used for the speech of black populations (Negro speech, Black English, and variants), terms used to refer to normative speech (standard and non-standard), terms used for techniques of teaching oral English (technique-oriented, language-oriented, and issue-oriented, and bidialectalism and biloquialism), and other miscellaneous terms (e.g., linguistics vs. sociolinguistics, informants, populations, and subjects, disadvantaged and speech deficit). Because the terms are closer to the real and recognizable social issues of the era, they create more controversy than more abstract terminology in some other disciplines. As such, interpretation of terminology can interfere with finding solutions to problems. Moderation and understanding is the only reasonable approach to terminology in the study of language in society. (MSE)

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TERMINOLOGICAL INTERFERENCE IN THE STUDY OF THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE

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Terminological Interference in the Study of the Social Aspects of Language

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In the history of any emerging field of study the terminology may develop in a number of different ways. The more abstract the field, the more arbitrary and authoritarian the terms may be. Thus theologians coin terms such as *election* and *regeneration;* philosophers create words such as *existential* or *phenomenological,* and physicists invent such terms as *valence* and *ionization.* In the social sciences, however, such arbitrariness and authoritarianism is harder to come by. Newly-coined terms come closer to the lives of those who hear such words and become offensive much more easily than in the "hard" sciences or in abstract fields such as theology or philosophy. Everyone becomes an authority on whether or not a term is appropriate (with some justification) and it soon becomes apparent that a term, once coined, stands very little chance of continuous survival. This phenomenon, in itself, is of considerable interest to language specialists, and it parallels the slippery nature of the fields these terms attempt to define. For it appears that such words mean what they seem to mean only during our first casual understanding of them (which may be justification enough for their existence), then they proceed to become less and less useful the more we learn about the subject.

Through it all, it is the duty of practitioners in the field to clarify, redefine, react to criticisms of people whose perspective differs from that of the specialists and, when necessary, to coin more useful or less offensive labels. Meanwhile, both internally and externally, charges of all sorts are hurled at all whose interpretation of the term does not coincide with one's own.

There can be no doubt but that this developmental interchange can be a healthy thing. No field of study yet has proven itself to have such interdisciplinary sensitivities that it is above criticism. Linguists, of course, have not been the exception to this phenomenon, as their terminological muddle concerning the social implications of language use will most certainly bear out.

Only within very recent years have they concerned themselves with the social implications of the use of the language. Some who are especially concerned with the varieties of English in urban areas carry out basic research on language variation and acquisition among social groups (e.g., Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley, 1967), on standard language in relation to nonstandard varieties (Labov, *et al,* 1968), and on attitudes toward the use of language by speakers

of all social levels (Shuy, Baratz, and Wolfram, 1969). Some (e. g., Feigenbaum, 1969), are particularly interested in the nonstandard English of the urban Negro and are preparing teaching materials for elementary and secondary schools, as well as participating in teacher training to provide the necessary skills for dealing with nonstandard speech.

The growth and development of the terminology in this field of linguistic focus has been of considerable interest, particularly as it has related to minority groups. Such terms as *Negro speech, Black English, social dialects, bidialectalism, Sub-Standard English, Standard English, sociolinguistics, informants, subjects, deficit,* and *disadvantaged* have all been seriously called to question both from within and without the field of linguistics. And, social tensions being what they are, persons who use some or all of these terms may be called *naive, racist, insensitive, prejudiced, old-fashioned,* or just *plain stupid,* regardless of their original motivation and despite any protests of innocence. It is not my purpose in this paper to settle any terminological disputes or to redefine certain concepts but, rather, I wish to call attention to certain aspects of the arguments and argue for moderation in the scholarly reaction to terminology which is not as explicit or unbiased as might be desired to those who see the subject from a different perspective or at a later stage in its development or use. Intemperate reaction to the terms being used or discarded in the field which embraces the social dimensions of language in our country, as shall be seen, has masked many more serious problems and has led to time consuming duplication of effort and delays in getting into serious discussions. The following terms have been selected for focus in this paper in that they illustrate various types of interference problems.

1. *The Terms Used for the Speech of Negroes.* Perhaps no term has caused as much furor in recent months as the introduction of *Negro speech, Black English,* and other variants of the same referent by linguists who have discussed the correlation of race and linguistic features. It is not our purpose here to review the literature by linguists on whether or not there is a difference between Negro and white speech in this country. Dialectologists such as Kurath (1939), McDavid (1958), and Williamson (1961) have attended largely to matters of lexicon and phonology, finding few if any racial differences. Creolists such as Stewart (1967, 1968) and Bailey (1965, 1968) have concerned themselves with grammatical features, finding certain racial contrasts which indicate deep structure differences between Southern Negro and Southern white speech. Other linguists who have been less interested in the historical derivation of the speech of Negroes and whites have begun a systematic, synchronic description of the speech of Negroes, comparing these descriptions with whites. Generally they have found the differences to be relatively few (Labov 1966, Wolfram 1969), but of tremendous social importance. At least part of the problem

involved in any reference to the speech of native American Negroes stems from historical, highly-prejudiced stereo-types. To many people, Negro speech connotes something of the minstrel show, darkie jokes, and a kind of over-simple, childlike intelligence long assumed by some whites to characterize the race. That such interference enters into this discussion is of no credit to the history of American race relations, but it *does* enter in and it *is* a factor, even for those who do not share this prejudice. That is, even those whites who may respond to Negroes without a trace of bias may not be able to totally disregard the general connotation of the terms used to refer to them racially. Therefore, those scholars who use the term *Negro speech* may well predict a certain amount of discomfort from many readers. What is most important, however, is that well-meaning readers not categorically impugn the motives of the scholar who uses this term. Chances are if he is truly biased he will reveal his bias in more substantive ways than in the term he chooses to define his focus.

Any scholar who deals with issues related to race today runs the serious risk of fluctuating contemporary opinion. In matters of English usage, even the best dictionaries will often have to admit that the usage is currently unsettled and that the final outcome (if there is one) is not yet predictable. Good observers of usage will be able to pin-point at least some of the basic outlines of language change in progress, noting its early phases, its middle stages, and its later development. If the item in question is in its latter stages, it may be possible to say something about where it is going.

It is no secret that the terms which Negroes wish to be used as references to their race are in serious fluctuation. Some prefer *black;* some *Negro;* some *Afro* or a derivative thereof. Very few choose *colored* and, of course, none prefer the pejoratives such as *darkie, jig,* or *nigger.*

American general sensitivity to choice among *Negro, colored, black,* or *Afro* was not evident as recently as 1965, when in Las Vegas I discovered in an informal survey that Negroes of all economic status preferred to be called *Negro,* while at the same time whites of all status were referring to them as *colored.* This general insensitivity was doubtless characteristic of many other American cities at that time. Today, the situation is much more unclear, for despite the development of the black consciousness movement, many black people prefer the term *Negro* (perhaps in opposition to black power or at least in fear of it or its consequences). Scholars who have been speaking and writing about the speech of Negroes frequently are asked why they insist on using *black* rather than *Negro* or, conversely, *Negro* rather than *black.* Any answer, of course, must reflect the current lack of stability in this designation. But it has become almost a ritual for such scholars to expect the first question from the floor to be an attack on his use of one or any other of these terms. This is

frequently followed by a vigorous applause from blacks and whites alike, from a variety of motivations.

In the summer of 1969 Mayor Richard J. Hatcher of Gary, Indiana addressed a nearly all-Negro audience in Memphis by beginning: "My black brothers and sisters; my soul brothers and soul sisters; my African-American brothers and sisters; my Negro brothers and sisters; my colored brothers and sisters." Mayor Hatcher, of course, was deliberately recognizing the growing terminological problem, even as it exists among all-Negro groups. The rebirth of the term *black* is often disliked by older Negroes who lived through the period when it was primarily derogatory. Yet it is almost universally accepted by younger Negroes, for whom it stands for a new attitude or way of thinking. In a recent poll conducted by *Newsweek* (June 20, 1969), however, *black* did not fare as well as one might have suspected among the general American Negro population:

	Like Most	*Like Least*
Negro	38%	11%
Colored	20%	31%
Black	19%	25%
Afro-American	10%	11%
Don't Care	6%	6%
Not Sure	7%	16%

The results of the *Newsweek* survey were supported in a later, more informal survey by the Washington *Star* (September 23, 1969) in the District of Columbia among Negro students, housewives, construction workers, and mechanics. Although all students preferred *black*, the overall majority chose *Negro* and there were even scattered votes for *colored*.

It should be obvious from even anecdotal evidence, however, that the term used to represent the linguistic features of Negroes, whether used exclusively by Negroes (as in the use of distributive *be*, Fasold, 1969), whether used with a higher frequency by Negroes than by whites (as in most other features discussed in the literature so far, Fasold and Wolfram, 1970), or whether used by Negroes in the North even though shared by whites and Negroes in the South, is in a state of transition.

Easy answers to language issues in transition have long been thought possible. Thus the critics of Webster's third *New Unabridged Dictionary* in 1961 screamed long and loud about its presumed permissiveness. Many of these same critics were given their opportunity to solve the problems faced by the Merriam Webster people when the *American Heritage Dictionary* asked

104 writers, editors, professors, and public figures to decide collectively on the merits of various items in divided usage. The results, though not surprising to students of language in use, showed relatively little unanimity. Since their opposite reactions to certain words and grammatical choices were not unlike the current rhetoric about terms such as *Negro speech* and *Black English*, it appears that we are simply going through the normal paranoia that besets a people when terminology is in flux. Sixty per cent of the American Heritage consultants, for example, agreed to *It is me* in speech and 22% agreed to it in writing. One professor, however, attacked it as "grammatical incest," contributing a predictable *ad hominem* flavor to the argument. By the same token a sports writer considered the use of *to gift* (transitive verb) as "immoral." The snobbish imprecations of one's choice between terms, in fact, could reflect the highest scorn. The use of the verb *finalize* was described as follows: "To be used only facetiously, except by bureaucrats and generals."

What can be more natural, in light of these reactions to language features which contain a relatively small explosive charge in today's world, than for people of any persuasion to feel uncomfortable about terms which involve designation of race (which we little understand) in relationship to language (which almost everyone thinks he knows about and considers himself an authority on)? And what can be more natural than for insecure people to shout "racism" at those who use the designators in ways that differ from their own?

2. *Terms Used to Refer to Normative Speech.* The designations *standard* (and its variants) and *non-standard* (and its variants) are deceptively slippery. Standard cannot be defined as the official language or dialect of a country, since Swedish is an official language of Finland even though it is spoken by less than one-tenth of the population. Likewise it would be dangerous to consider the majority language the standard, in light of nations like the Philippines where English may be the most common language even though it is spoken by considerably fewer than the majority.

The development of a standard language is usually a two stage process. First a model for imitation is developed, often with a literature. This body of discourse attracts the loyalty and interest of a group of speakers, usually as a result of a number of complex and unorganized events.

The second stage involves promoting this model over rival models. The most successful promotion, of course, is a felt need. Institutions may try to promote certain models or parts of such models (even as Martin Luther promoted German). Most often, however, institutional language promotion has not been successful. The Irish State has essentially failed to reinstate Gaelic

and there is no reason to believe that the recent decision of Zambia to cancel language description projects which call attention to non-Bemba languages will be any more successful.

It is common in this country to think of Standard English in the sense embodied by the second stage rather than the first. That is, standardization is thought of as a process rather than as an extant situation; as a teaching-learning situation rather than as a stable circumstance; as a single norm rather than as one of a set of legitimate norms. If all the linguistic sub-sets of a given language were to share equal status, *standard* would have to refer to the acceptable forms found in each sub-set. For American English, this would yield (1) regional standards such as Northern Standard which differs from Midland Standard, (2) some sort of educational and socio-economic standards, which might yield differences across the lines of class status, (3) sex standards, which would clearly differentiate appropriate male from appropriate female speech, (4) age standards, which would legitimize different norms for different age groups, and (5) racial norms, which would define linguistic appropriateness differently by race. In each of these cases, at least part of the stage one situation obtains. There is a body of discourse which attracts the interest and loyalty of a group of speakers. Just how this came about may or may not be clear. It is, however, a synchronic event. One may be said to speak standard child speech, referring to the acceptable norms of the speech of that sub-set of the population. One may speak standard working-class English, using multiple negatives appropriately and with the proper mixture of analogized irregular verbs. Or one may speak appropriate female speech, calling on the proper mixtures of low vowel raising (in certain Northern cities) or a relatively lower frequency of occurrence of stigmatized grammatical features. In each case, the speaker may well be following the stage one process, using with proper loyalty the norms of the group to which he belongs.

So far, any problem connected with the use of the term *standard* stems from an incomplete description of the speech subset. In a sense, there is no such thing as non-standard as we usually think of the term today. On the contrary, non-standard child talk might well include an over use of polysyllabic terms. Non-standard working class speech might be defined as an over-reliance on single negatives and middle-class participles.

Stage two processes obviously account for our problems in defining Standard English. One sub-set of the population, consciously or not, has promoted its norms over the norms of the other sub-sets. As was indicated earlier, the most successful way to accomplish this is to promote a felt need (to this point the need must, by definition, be a *felt* need since, before such promotion, there

can have been no real one). The obvious technique used to create this need is intimidation. Make the members of one sub-set feel that they need to speak like us! But a second motivation can also be present — that of honor. In what regard is this speech held? Until recent months, we assumed that a person who faced a felt need to speak one way also honored that system. To a certain extent, this is still true, especially among Negroes who prefer not to be called *black* or for educators with such vested interests in a system that change, one of the most underrated subjects and tools of education, is a threat rather than a sign of vitality. But for many others, including younger blacks in particular, the need to follow the norms of another sub-set is becoming less and less obvious. Some see the need, for a variety of reasons, but do not necessarily hold it in high regard.[1] What this situation signals, of course, is a new breakdown in the long-held linguistic hierarchy of cross-sub-sets of our society. Yet we may find considerable evidence of this in non-racial sub-sets. No self-respecting twelve year old boy would be caught dead talking like a girl. Many a Southerner will defend Southern speech as a matter of honor. Is it then surprising to find the concept of black pride manifested in the phonology, grammar, and lexicon of people who are proud of their race?

In the midst of this situation lurks the term *non-standard*, created as an ameliorative of *sub-standard*, but itself exuding ethnocentrism if not bias. Technically, by the stage one definition, it carries no more symbolic bias than does *standard*. Yet it seems more evaluative, more critical, and more biased, probably because it is prefaced with a negative morpheme. The social intimidation which is fostered in the stage-two process naturally deflates the speech of people not in the elevated sub-set. Curiously enough, *non-standard English* seems to relate only to socio-economic status and, to a certain extent, to race and to style in American society. There is no conscious understanding of it as related to the speech of one sex over the other or one age more than another although in practice the schools seem to lean toward female and adult norms, defining linguistic assertions of adolescent maleness and appropriate child language as underdeveloped, if not deficient.

If *Standard English* is viewed in the stage-two, overall societal sense which involves a promoted norm which is shared by all or almost all sub-sets at a given period of time, its definition seems to be no more difficult than when *standard* is viewed as the stage-one, agreed-upon rules of a well defined sub-set such as Midland, male, black, lower socio-economic status. In both cases, any deviation from the agreed-upon norms is considered non-standard. That is, *Standard English* is more easily defined by what it is *not* than by what it is. Stage-two standard is in actuality, however, more complicated in that it involves a complex set of promotions in relation to each other, all of which are capable of realignment at any time. Changes in standardness are based on extra-

linguistic forces directed by all of the laws and pressures of society, not just those of language.

Some of these forces are so subtle that they slip by practically unnoticed by the society in which they operate. Thus linguistic innovations may come from such generally low-prestige elements of society as prisoners, gamblers, and dope merchants, and work their way into common use by the unwary respectable gentry.

Although the definition of Standard English is complicated and the process of standardization is little understood by native speakers, Americans of all types are quite unanimous in their subjective responses to what constitutes standard or normative behavior in English. Labov's subjective reaction tests first pointed out the similarity of responses to standardness across social class (1966). His findings were borne out in the Psycholinguistic Attitude Study conducted by Shuy, Baratz, and Wolfram (1969) where it was shown that teenagers and adults of all social classes and races were able to assess the occupation-education level of tape-recorded stimuli with almost equal accuracy. This is not to say that they can explain exactly what it is they are doing when they make such judgments or that they can identify the grammatical forms or phonological features which cause them to react as they do. But if asked to respond in terms which they can understand (such as the task of identifying the race or social status of the speaker), their norms of Standard English are quite similar, regardless of how different from these norms their own speech may be.

3. *Terms Used for Techniques of Teaching Oral English.* It is difficult to determine whether we are indebted to the person who first suggested that we teach non-standard speakers of English as though they were acquiring a foreign language or whether this person, whoever he may be, did us a general disservice with the suggestion. The idea has brought both satisfaction and grief. The grief has come from countless papers which have begun with the assumption that such a relationship was valid and have proceeded to illustrate how non-standard English speakers can learn from regular foreign language learning drills.

There are at least three approaches to the teaching of standard English to non-standard English speakers that have characterized recent scholarly endeavor.

1. *Technique-oriented* approaches. To scholars from the field of TESOL, it is only natural that a language-teaching technique which allegedly works for Spanish speakers will also work for Black English speakers.[2]

Consequently a number of drills can be built, the language lab can be properly programmed, and we are almost in business. The fallacy here, of course, is that of assuming that learning a second language is like learning another sub-system of a language. No proof of this exists.

2. The second approach may be called *language-oriented*. By this I mean that the development of lessons or materials is preceded by an analysis of the language sub-system in question so that any techniques are borrowed or invented only in relationship to such language. This approach does not assume that all TESOL techniques are valid for sub-system acquisition, or that any of them are. It first notes linguistic contrasts in detail across sub-systems, then looks for pedagogical techniques to accommodate them.

3. The third approach is essentially *issue-oriented*. To those who espouse it, there is no difference between the technique- and the language-oriented approaches. There is no need to start with either assumption since speakers of a linguistic sub-system need not be taught Standard Oral English at all. Their system is as good as anyone else's and they refuse to be subjected to stage-two promotions of one system over another. If any change is to be wrought, it is on the society as a whole which refuses to accept extant pluralism. With curious logic, such advocates may see a certain usefulness in teaching minority-group children, for example, to read or to write in a promoted stage-two sub-system but not to speak in it.

Linguists who have advocated any kind of pedagogy at all in such situations have been plagued by terminological interference. The early formulation of the term *bi-dialectalism* came as a fortuitous shortening from *functional bi-dialectalism* which was abandoned quite early, possibly because it sounded too much like a rare, tropical disease. But *bi-dialectalism*, itself, has several connotative strikes against it, not the least of which is its base, *dialect*. As has been observed recently on several occasions, the lay public simply does not respond neutrally to the term *dialect*, which is more often thought of as something spoken by someone else, quite possibly someone quite unrespectable. As an antidote to this, the term *biloquial* was suggested (Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley, 1967) with relatively little impact. In materials developed for classroom use, of course, there was never any need to describe the concept to the students so the materials of Feigenbaum (1970) and those of Davis, Leaverton and Gladney (1969) contain no such terms. The difficulty with the term *bi-dialectalism* will no doubt continue, especially now that James Sledd has linked it with the alleged racist and materialistic motives of those who espouse it

(Sledd, 1969). Ralph Fasold and I refer to *biloquialism* in our introduction to *Teaching Standard English in the Inner City* (1970) but the various contributors to that volume use a variety of terms, including William Stewart's *quasi-foreign language*.

The interference forces at work in the case of terms used for techniques of teaching oral English, then, include lay misunderstanding of the technical term *dialect*, internal theoretical accusations of the motives of those who advocate the technique, and connotative inappropriateness of both *functional bidialectalism* and *quasi-foreign language*, neither of which sound legitimate or healthy enough.

4. *Other Miscellaneous Terms.* Earlier in this paper the term for the field of study involved in the kinds of research noted here was called *sociolinguistics*. As a field of study, this area is not yet precisely defined but already there is somewhat of a terminological battle in progress. It is highly questionable whether language can exist apart from social context and Labov has observed that the term is oddly redundant if not outright misleading (1969:1). For Labov, *linguistics* is a quite adequate descriptor since linguistics has at its core the study of language in some social context. Sociolinguistics, then, is really only realistic linguistics and, as such, does not require a special label. This terminological battle derives primarily from the theoretical assumptions of its practitioners.

Terms for the people who serve as the source of data for the study of language are also subject to criticism. The people who are examined under the linguist's supervision are frequently designated as *informants*, *subjects*, or *populations*, all of which smack of a kind of cold impersonality which does our cause no good.

Other terms frequently used in the study of the social implications of language usage include such puzzlers as *disadvantaged*, *speech deficit*, and many more of this type. But our point, by now, is probably clear. The terminology in this field is at least part of our problem. Being closer to the real and recognizable issues of our times than many other fields, our terms create more stir than the abstract designators of physics or theology. When people are involved, a kind of leveling takes place. Everyone considers himself an authority on the propriety of a particular term. Furthermore, everyone is a potential axe-grinder in social issues and, as such, he is frequently tempted to see malice of some sort in an argument which does not share all his assumptions. One easy target in such circumstances is the terminology. Interference to pursuit of a solution to a given issue, then, is apt to come from the social stance of

the reader-listener. Historical interference can also impede this pursuit, as in the case of the generationally fluctuating stereotypes of the term *black*. The different assumptions of different disciplines or fields of study can also cause interference in the search for solutions. A clear example of this is found in the various interpretations placed upon terms like *non-standard* and *deficit* by linguists and psychologists. Whether the terms are viewed imperfectly because of emotional, historical, social, or linguistic interference, we must learn to live with them, for it is unlikely that this or any other brand of social behavior will find less problematic ways of designation, and the only way to live with terminological interference to the study of language in society is with moderation and understanding.

[1] For educators, this poses a somewhat different kind of problem than is often recognized in the English classrooms of America, similar, perhaps, to that of a doctoral student's approach to a foreign-language requirement. Language acquisition is needed, but resented.
[2] See, for example, Slager (1967), Allen (1969), Robinett (1969). For a broader overview of conceptual approaches to teaching Standard English, whether linguistically oriented or not, see Roger Shuy, "Bonnie and Clyde Tactics in English Teaching," Florida FL Reporter, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 81-83, 160-161.

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